Case and Marshall’s reference (in their chapter in this book) to the limitations of relying on approaches to learning theory, or phenomenography, “on its own” points to the dominance of this theoretical model of learning in many of the literatures of higher education. Although this dominance does not extend to North America, it can be seen in the main UK-based journals, which are widely used in British, European, Australian, South African and Hong Kong higher education contexts. These are therefore referred to as “non-North American” higher education contexts (see Tight, 2007). This chapter focuses on student approaches to learning as defined in this area of the literature, with comparative reference to trends in North America.

The first section reports on a review of article titles relating to student learning over four decades in three non-North American journals and two North American journals, in order to test the claim that one approach dominates so much of the field. The results of this review are discussed in relation to a summary of broad theoretical moves in psychology and sociology over the same period, and then in relation to research in higher education published in the fields of adult education and sociologuistics. It is argued that the research published in higher education journals is generally at least one, if not two, decades behind educational research in other relevant fields.

Four Decades of Student Learning Research

According to Richardson, “the basic distinction between deep and surface approaches has been confirmed . . . not only in Europe, but in other parts of the world as well” (2000: 27). He suggests that this way of understanding student learning is so established that it has become “perhaps even a cliché in discussions about teaching and learning in higher education” (ibid.). Although this state of affairs may seem to suggest that the basic “problem” of understanding student learning has been solved, it could be argued that such statements simply reflect an advanced stage of development in one particular theoretical and methodological strand of research. This chapter is not concerned with mounting a critique of approaches to learning research (for this, see Haggis, 2003). Instead it asks what the effect of the dominance of this perspective may have been, in terms of the neglect of other possible approaches to the study of human learning.
Methodology

In order to test the claim that approaches to learning research has dominated thinking about learning in non-North American higher education contexts up to now, a review of articles on student learning was first carried out in three key non-North American higher education journals, covering the period from the 1970s to the present day (this was a review of titles only). The journals reviewed were Higher Education, Studies in Higher Education and Teaching in Higher Education. In terms of location and status, Tight (2007) has suggested that the journal Higher Education (HE) is generally regarded as “the leading non-North American international” higher education journal, and that Studies in Higher Education (SHE) is “the leading UK-based” journal (2007: 239). Teaching in Higher Education (THE), a more recent journal that has only been published since the late 1990s, was reviewed as well in order to compare a newer, initially less prestigious journal with the two more established ones.

In each journal, for each decade, a content analysis was performed on the language used in article titles relating to student learning. The six categories generated in relation to these titles were “cognitive psychology”, “approaches to learning”, “curricular innovation”, “social context/student experience”, “critical perspectives” and “discourse/writing”. The categories were not restricted to areas such as “theory” or “methodology”, but used a wider range of concepts in an attempt to capture the different areas of focus represented by the titles. Some of these could be classified as relating to specific theoretical approaches (e.g. “cognitive psychology”, “approaches to learning”, “discourse analysis”), but others, such as “curricular innovation” and “social context/student experience” were not, or only partially so. Three passes through the total data set were performed in order to cross-reference and confirm the categories.

That it was not possible to group the articles into solely theoretical areas is interesting. Though many of the perspectives categorised as “social context”, for example, are clearly broadly sociological, “the student experience” aspect of this category can also incorporate a range of political agendas, as well as methodological approaches linked to quite specific (e.g. critical and emancipatory) strands of sociology. The category “curricular innovation” represents a broad-based area of activity that might draw on any number of different theories, or possibly even have very little theoretical basis. For example, ideas such as “peer-learning”, “problem-based learning” and “self-regulated learning” could be seen to have developed as much in relation to cultural trends and value-positions as to research or theory. The discourse/writing category often reflects theoretical discourse analysis approaches, but also includes discussion of essay writing and writing skills.

Each category could be said to be attempting to answer a particular question. For example, cognitive psychology and approaches to learning might be said to be asking: “what can we discover about how individuals learn?” Key words in cognitive psychology include: personality, attainment, ability, motivation, information-retrieval, type, learning style/strategy, personal meaning, experiment, behaviour, orientation, achievement, performance, preference, study orchestration, processing, effectiveness and learning outcome. Approaches to learning includes phrases such as: approaches to study, approaches to learning, student perceptions, student conceptions, misconceptions, deep learning, dissonant conceptions, student ways of thinking, orientations to learning, and deep and surface. Although initially seen as distinct from cognitive psychology, approaches to learning work arises within the cognitive tradition, and as time goes on titles indicate a blurring of the distinction between them. For example, in 1996, an article titled “metacognitive, cognitive and affective aspects of learning styles and strategies: a phenomenographic analysis” appeared, and, in 2002, one titled “validation of a free response test of deep learning about the normal swallowing process”.

Curricular innovation might be said to be asking the question: “what are the implications of our knowledge about individual learning for classroom teaching and curriculum design?” Key phrases
in this category include: project work, peer learning, small group discussions, collaborative learning, problem-based learning, learning for self-direction, action learning, continuous assessment, increased student participation, task-based learning, negotiated learning, computer conferencing and resource-based learning. Article titles that were focused on teaching, instruction or teacher action were not included in the analysis. Although this category appears to focus on “teaching methods”, titles here were only included if they focused on creating new kinds of learning experience.

Social context/student experience perspectives initially ask: “what is going on outside the classroom which might impact upon learning outcomes?”, and “what do students themselves have to say about learning?” Later this focus extends to “how does what is done in the classroom impact upon work and life prospects?”, and finally to issues such as “how can classroom experience serve the agenda of lifelong learning?” Key phrases here include: mature students, problems of adjustment, student stress, students with disabilities, students and social class, cultural and social capital, gender and inequality, international students, the student experience, integrating study with work and difference. Article titles which referred to participation statistics or organisational aspects of access policies were not included.

Critical perspectives ask questions such as: “what are the limitations of our current positions and views about learning?” These perspectives were often indicated by a question mark, in combination with words such as critical/critique, challenge, hidden curriculum, transformation, power, tensions, transgression and ethics. Discourse and writing perspectives are an extension of both social/student experience and critical perspectives. These perspectives might ask questions such as “what is the effect of particular types of language use in relation to student learning outcomes?”, or “how does the way we speak, and what we ask students to write, create impediments to students’ learning?” Key phrases here include: writing skills training, writing as a tool for learning, disciplinary discourses, writing experiences, academic literacies, genre effects/analysis, writing styles and gender/achievement, dialogic behaviour, problems of communicating feedback, participating in academic discourse.

The categories are listed above in the order that they appear in higher education journals through time. For example, there are no titles deemed to belong to the discourse/writing category in the 1970s; and social context and critical perspective titles become more prevalent throughout the decades.


Figure 3.1 summarises the relative proportions of the different categories in each journal for each decade.

In the 1970s the main focus of HE in relation to learning appears to be the building of a knowledge base about individual student learning (cognitive psychology), and the development of a particular extension of this approach (approaches to learning). A smaller proportion of articles explore the application of this knowledge to practice (curricular innovation), and only a very small proportion of articles indicate an interest in understanding the effect of what goes on beyond the classroom (social context/student experience). SHE, by contrast, appears relatively unconcerned with building or discussing the knowledge base, but is very interested in considering the implications of research ideas about learning for practical teaching.

In the 1980s, the interest in learning research and theory has increased in SHE, whilst in HE it remains proportionally the same. Learning research in HE, however, has slightly less of a focus in this decade upon approaches to learning perspectives. Social and critical perspectives are increasing, particularly in SHE, with the combined effect of these increases resulting in a reduction in
consideration of experimental approaches to teaching and the curriculum. Titles suggest that interest in learning is still overwhelmingly focused at the level of the classroom.

In the 1990s, HE’s interest in building up a knowledge base about individual learning has increased very slightly, but is proportionally largely unchanged since the 1970s. Approaches to learning research, however, now makes up a much larger proportion of this focus. In the 1990s HE is only marginally more interested in asking “what’s going on outside the classroom which might impact upon learning outcomes?” (social context/student experience) than it was in the 1970s, and is less interested in this question than it was in the 1980s. It is also apparently slightly less interested
in critiquing its perspectives than it was in the previous decade, though discourse/writing perspectives have increased. SHE, though more prepared to engage in critique, also appears to be less interested in asking what is going on for students beyond the classroom than it was in the 1980s. Both journals show an increase in cognitive/approaches to learning approaches, and a corresponding reduction in curricular innovation and social perspectives. THE, a new journal in this decade, goes against these trends, returning to the much earlier interest in curricular innovation, and also developing critical and discourse perspectives to a greater degree.

By the 2000s, the three journals appear to have settled into a pattern in terms of distribution of focus. HE continues to publish the largest amount of psychologically-based research and theory; THE publishes the least; and SHE is between the two. Approaches to learning perspectives have reduced in both SHE and THE, but not in HE. All three journals are now less interested in discussing classroom practice than in considering social and critical perspectives.

### Comparison with North American Trends in the Same Period

The two North American journals which will now be considered were also considered by Tight (2007). Both the Journal of Higher Education (JHE) and Research into Higher Education (RHE) were analysed across the same period as the non-North American journals considered so far (1970–2007).

The trends observable in article titles focused on learning in these two journals are somewhat different to those identified in non-North American contexts. Across the same period JHE, for example, has far fewer articles devoted to discussion of curricular innovation, even in the 1970s, and less of a focus on approaches obviously based in cognitive psychology (the titles for this journal, however, although indicating general areas of interest such as “college adjustment” or “cultural barriers”, often give less away in terms of psychological or sociological orientation). Approaches to learning are almost nowhere to be seen (it is hard to tell, for example, whether occasional reference to “perceptions” might have been influenced by approaches to learning work). In this journal a large number of titles reflect various types of “social context” perspective, although this focus does not necessarily indicate a sociological perspective. Reflecting the reality of a mass higher education system attempting to attract and retain a wide variety of students, this journal’s engagement with issues of race, colour and “the disadvantaged” is prevalent from the beginning of the 1970s, whereas in the UK-based journals race/ethnicity are mentioned quite rarely, and then only in the 2000s. JHE also focuses increasingly throughout the decades on issues of persistence, withdrawal and retention, very often explicitly in relation to variously described “non-traditional” students.

RHE has a similar focus in terms of the three areas identified in JHE (cognitive psychology, “the disadvantaged”, and persistence/withdrawal/retention). Within cognitive psychology, there does not appear to be a dominance of any one area of interest, and only minimal direct influence of approaches to learning work. In the 1990s, however, when the influence of approaches to learning in the non-North American journals is at its peak, the learning titles in RHE suggest a similar type of focus, expressed in phrases such as approaches to learning, learning style, beliefs about the nature of knowledge, and in particular “epistemological beliefs” and “epistemological styles”.

In contrast to HE, the non-North American journal with the most predominantly psychological approach, in the following decade (2000s) RHE develops a broad range of psychological interests rather than privileging the development of approaches to learning-type work. However, although this indicates a broader approach within the cognitive tradition, closer investigation suggests that this breadth of topics may be the result of an overall psychological orientation towards all learning topics, including those in the “social context” category, which in the non-North American journals are increasingly being analysed using sociological, critical and discourse approaches. From its
predominantly psychological position, *HE*, in the non-North American context, privileges approaches to learning research; whereas in *RHE*, the dominant area of interest in this decade is persistence/withdrawal/retention.

Although apparently restricted to this largely psychological approach, at the same time *RHE* shows a much earlier interest than the non-North American journals in considering how aspects of institutional culture and practice might be affecting student learning. By the 2000s, however, when this area of interest in the non-North American journals is being explored using reflexive forms of critique and discourse analysis, the titles in *RHE* continue to indicate more psychological and measurement-based approaches. Overall, and also somewhat paradoxically, considering this general psychological bias, the titles in both *RHE* and *JHE* (although they actually mention “learning” relatively infrequently) suggest a somewhat broader view of learning than the non-North American journals. For example, these journals quite regularly discuss the idea of growth and development (personal, intellectual and vocational), and start discussing and attempting to measure the long-term social and economic benefits of higher education at quite an early stage.

Four Decades of Higher Education Research in its Wider Theoretical and Disciplinary Context

The trends outlined in the journals discussed will now be compared with key theoretical moves in psychology and, to a lesser extent, sociology (see Figure 3.2).

1970s

In the 1970s, the non-North American journals arguably take an individualistic approach to the study of student learning, which is rooted in both behaviourist and cognitive psychology. Within this overall orientation, there is some quite radical thinking, demonstrated by titles such as “a course without a structure”, and “freedom in the selection of course content”. The focus, however, is still predominantly upon answering the questions “what can we discover about how individuals learn?” and “what are the implications of our knowledge about individual learning for classroom teaching and curriculum design?”

In this decade, the discipline of psychology is developing a much wider range of cognitive perspectives. Potentially relevant, among many others, are the social and interactional perspectives of Bandura and Leont’ev, and the philosophical perspective of John Dewey. In addition, humanistic psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers, and psychoanalytic theorists such as Erikson and Freud, are developing ideas which are being rapidly taken up by those who teach adults in contexts other than universities.

1980s

In the 1980s, the non-North American higher education journals continue to take a predominantly individualistic approach to the study of student learning, demonstrated most clearly by the overall increase in cognitive and approaches to learning perspectives. The potentially radical questioning of the 1970s in relation to curricular innovation appears to become reined in during this decade, particularly in *HE*, with discussions of self-managed and structure-free learning giving way to discussion of more manageable technologies, such as peer teaching and problem-based learning. In this decade social context perspectives also begin to increase, but these are arguably limited to attempts to answer the question “what’s going on outside the classroom which might impact upon learning outcomes?” The focus of titles in this category is largely limited to a concern for the effects of access movements, and the resulting influx into higher education of “non-standard” entrants,
### Figure 3.2 Comparison of Broad Theoretical Shifts in Psychology, Sociology and Higher Education Research through Four Decades.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1970s</th>
<th>1980s</th>
<th>1990s</th>
<th>2000s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>PSYCHOLOGY (individual/interactional):</strong> behaviourism/objectives (Bloom); cognitivism, including interactional perspectives (Dewey, Bruner, Bandura, Leont’ev) and developmental theories (Piaget, Kohlberg, Erikson); humanism (Rogers, Maslow); psychoanalysis (Freud, Fromm, Lacan)</td>
<td><strong>PSYCHOLOGY (individual/interactional/social):</strong> All previous perspectives plus cognitive constructivism; social constructivism; multiple &amp; triarchic theories of intelligence; socio-cultural approaches (e.g. activity theory); community psychology (radical social justice perspective, e.g. Burman); discourse perspectives; neural networks, connectionism</td>
<td><strong>PSYCHOLOGY (individual/interactional/social/distributed/evolutionary):</strong> All previous plus development of collaborative, cooperative and discursive approaches; perspectives from neuroscience (cognitive neuropsychology); ecological and dynamic systems theories (Maturana &amp; Varela; Fogel; Bosma &amp; Kunnan); sociogenetics (Valsiner); evolutionary perspectives</td>
<td>Continuing development of social/interactional, distributed, networked, and emergentist perspectives in both psychology and social theory. Increasing amounts of interdisciplinary work, and perspectives which try to overcome the perceived boundaries between social/biological/technological</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>SOCIOMETRY/SOCIAL THEOR (social):</strong> neo-Marxism; interactionism/interpretivism; sociology of knowledge, post-modern critique</td>
<td><strong>SOCIOMETRY/SOCIAL THEOR (social):</strong> agency, meaning, interaction, structure (Goffman, Giddens); class, capital, power (Habermas, Bourdieu); “minority standpoint epistemologies”: gender, race, sexuality &amp; disability; post-modern/post-structuralist critique (Foucault, Lyotard)</td>
<td><strong>SOCIOMETRY/SOCIAL THEOR (interactional/social/distributed/evolutionary/individual):</strong> All previous perspectives continue and are joined by complexity theory and actor network theory (Latour, Byrne, Law &amp; Urry); morphogenetic theory (Archer)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**HIGHER EDUCATION**

**Individual:** personality, attainment, motivation, information-retrieval, student type, approaches to study, perceptions, student learning processes

**Social:** access, mature students

**Individual:** affect, anxiety, self-directed learning readiness scale, locus of control, skills, conceptions, approaches, perceptions, individualised learning, problem-based learning, independent study

**Social:** access, comparative achievements of conventional/non-traditional students, student experience, gender, mature students, social class, social disadvantage, groupwork

**Individual:** study orchestrations, learning outcomes, study deficiencies, gender & learning style, learning behaviour, learning strategies, approaches & mature students/ gender, perceptions, conceptions, self-directed learning, problem-based learning, reflection

**Social:** mature students, class, gender, social inequality, adult learning, student experience, international students, disability

**Individual:** individual differences/styles, motivation, text & learner variables, learning outcomes, student type, threshold concepts, attrition, metacognition, dissonance, achievement, approaches, perceptions, conceptions, orientations, alienation/belonging, active learning, self-directed learning, experiential learning, learning journals.

**Social:** mature students, academic & social integration, diversity, student debt, disabled students, adults, networked learning, web-mediated discussion (socio-culturally appropriate methodologies, university culture, work-related learning, power distance, complexity, uncertainty)
though a small number of articles reflect an interest in the “minority standpoint epistemologies” of
gender, race, sexuality and disability which are developing at this time in sociology (Ball, 2004).

In the 1980s in psychology itself, cognitive and constructivist approaches are developing into a range
of social and interactional perspectives, which explore the relationship between individual and “context” in
a variety of much more complicated and nuanced ways. Social constructivist approaches in general, and
particular socio-cultural approaches such as activity theory, begin to consider the implications of not thinking of
the individual as at the centre of all that might be designated “learning”. This is a radical conceptual departure
which is still almost completely absent in the higher education journals by 2007. In addition, the 1980s sees
the development of more politically radical branches of psychology, such as community psychology, which
critique and challenge mainstream psychology from a sociological perspective. In sociology, major theoretical
work in relation to the relationship between the individual and society is being carried out by theorists such as
Giddens, Habermas and Bourdieu, and a range of critical perspectives are being developed from feminist and
post-modern positions.

1990s

The relative absence of this more nuanced and critical approach to the theorisation of individual
and society continues, although to differing degrees, in the HE journals throughout the 1990s. Apparently
largely uninterested in developments in psychology and sociology, HE in particular maintains its focus
on the more individualistic and static aspects of cognitive psychology, and in this decade significantly
increases its coverage of approaches to learning research. Although the other two non-North American
journals are slightly more interested in critical and/or social perspectives, these are largely confined to
critiquing new teaching methodologies and/or discussing generalised (and often psychologised) notions of
gender, class and the student experience (exceptions are one article in HE which mentions cultural and
social capital, two articles in SHE which mention Bourdieu and Freire respectively, and one article in THE
which mentions post-modernism).

Whilst HE is focusing in this decade largely upon developing the concerns it identified in the
1980s (with limited critique of such concerns), the fields of psychology and sociology are witnessing
the emergence of additional new theoretical developments. Resulting partly from increasingly
cross-disciplinary flows of critique and ideas, these developments arguably have the potential to
reframe the very foundations of the social sciences, and to liberate research thinking in hitherto
unimaginable directions. In developmental psychology, for example, ideas from ecological and
dynamic systems theories begin to create a range of fluid, dynamic and de-centred notions of self
and society. In sociology, actor network theory creates new possibilities for a simultaneous framing
of the social, biological and technological in networked relations through time, while complexity
theory offers a radically contingent and dynamic perspective from which to consider the emergence
of adaptive specificity and difference across a range of disciplines.

2000s

As these new perspectives in psychology and sociology are continuing to develop throughout the
2000s, the higher education journals apparently show little awareness of their existence. There is not
yet even much discussion of theorists such as Habermas and Bourdieu and, in HE and SHE, there is
a very limited amount of self-referential critique. THE is the journal most influenced by critical
perspectives in sociology, but it too shows little sign of any interest in the ecological, dynamic
systems and network theorisations occurring in other fields. In all of the journals there is some
discussion of networks in relation to web-based and online learning, but this review of titles, at
least, gives no indication of any of the radical questioning of conventional epistemologies and
ontologies which is being explored in other disciplines.

Compared to other disciplines over this period, then, when it comes to discussions about learn-
ing (with some notable exceptions; see for example Webb, 1997; Terenzini, 1999; Mann, 2001), it
can be seen that the higher education journals, and HE in particular, focus on a very narrow range
of possible perspectives and methodologies. These are not only narrow in the sense that they are
restricted to a predominantly psychological approach to learning (Malcolm & Zukas, 2001), but also
narrow in terms of the field of psychology itself. Even in the 2000s, a great deal of discussion about
learning in higher education is still focused upon the same basic questions that arose in the 1970s;
“what can we discover about how individuals learn?”, “what are the implications of our knowledge
about individual learning for classroom teaching and curriculum design?”, and “what is going on
outside the classroom which might impact upon learning outcomes?”. THE is the only journal
which regularly explores questions such as “what is the eff
fect of particular types of language use in
relation to student learning outcomes?”, or “how does the way we speak, and what we ask students
to write, create impediments to students’ learning?” in any detail. Thus, HE, and to a lesser extent
also SHE (the two most prestigious non-North American journals), are usually at least one, and
sometimes two, decades behind research in the two fields which have most directly informed the
development of educational theory.

This lack, or, in the case of SHE and THE, relatively late, engagement with critical and social
perspectives in the mainstream higher education journals does not, however, mean that no critical
or social research has been carried out in the context of higher education. Relevant and challenging
work has been taking place in two other disciplinary areas, those of adult education and socio-
linguistics. Researchers in these fields do occasionally publish in higher education journals (see, for
example, Boud & Lee, 2005; Lillis & Turner, 2001), but in the main this work has been published in
the specialist journals of each field.

Adult Education
A comparison of the review of higher education journals with the leading UK-based journal in
the field of adult education, Studies in the Education of Adults (SEA), for the 2000s shows that SEA
is dominated by the perspectives that are relatively limited in the higher education journals (see
Figure 3.3). Although UK-based, this journal represents perspectives of North American, European,
South African and Australasian researchers, as well as writers from the UK.

Adult education has been much more influenced throughout the decades by the changes and
shifts in the wider intellectual worlds of the social sciences and the humanities. For example, in
the 1970s and 1980s, when humanistic psychology is developing in psychology, adult learning
theory begins to experiment with a wide range of ideas from humanism (e.g. self-actualisation,
facilitation, self-direction, experience, reflection). The reflexive critique, which can be seen in the
1970s in fields such as sociology, begins to affect adult education by the 1980s, as researchers
such as Brookfield (1993) and Boud (1990) bring critical reflexivity to bear not only on new
teaching ideas and methodologies, but also on the field of adult education itself. By the 1990s,
when the two main higher education journals are only just beginning to develop critical perspec-
tives, adult education is critiquing every one of its central concepts, including the “adult” in
adult education, and the policy contexts (such as “lifelong learning”) within which its activities
are embedded. At this time, adult education is also engaging with a range of issues related to
learning for and in work, and drawing upon a range of socio-cultural and post-modern/post-
structural theories.
By the 2000s, adult educators have been critiquing their own field from Marxist/neo-Marxist, post-modern/post-structural and feminist perspectives for a number of decades. In contrast to HE’s apparent ongoing attempt to establish a robust, “evidence-based” theory of individual learning, in adult education the influence of post-modernism/post-structuralism and critical theory is by now raising questions about the nature of knowledge, and considering the implications of seeing knowledge itself as de-centred, contingent, distributed and social. A comparison of article titles focused on learning in the most recent volumes of SHE and SEA available online at the time of writing gives an indication of the differing content of these two journals today (see Figure 3.4).

Sociolinguistics

The discourse/genre work arising out of the second area, sociolinguistics, is grounded in the tradition of new literacy studies (Thesen & van Pletzen, 2006), exemplified by the work of Barton,
Gee, Ivanic and Street (see Barton et al., 2000). Arguing for a view of literacy practices as social, context-specific, patterned by power relations, historically situated and dynamic, this work brings together the socio-cultural concerns of contemporary approaches in the social sciences and post-structural/discourse approaches in the humanities. The research from this perspective which focuses specifically on higher education has become known as “academic literacies”.

Academic literacies research first starts to make an appearance in the higher education context in the late 1990s, with the publication of an article by Lea & Street in SHE, and the books Student Writing in Higher Education (Lea & Stierer) in 2000, and Student Writing (Lillis) in 2001. As far as can be seen from the review of titles, HE publishes no research related to this tradition, with the exception of a very interesting article by Francis and Hallam in 2000, and Mann’s (2000) paper on the student experience of reading. SHE publishes a very small number of articles in the following years; notably Francis et al. in 2001, and Robson et al., and Lea, in 2004. THE, on the other hand, publishes a range of articles taking an academic literacies approach, focusing on issues such as critical approaches to text, and the analysis of communication and discourse.

Despite its extraordinary relevance for developing a wider range of understandings of teaching and learning, and, even more importantly, as a source of potentially generative/transformational critique of higher education cultures and practices, most academic literacies research is not published in the main higher education journals being examined here. Whilst some academic literacy researchers are on the editorial boards or review for SHE and THE, most of their work is not published in these journals, with the result that staff in higher education who might benefit from this work are very likely not aware that it exists. They will probably never see, for example, the special issue of the Journal of Applied Linguistics which came out in 2007, or the recent work in South Africa collected together in Thesen and van Pletzen (2006).
Looking to the Future

The results of the survey of higher education journal titles undertaken in this study appear to support the claim that approaches to learning research, as a sub-set of cognitive psychological learning theory, has dominated non-North American higher education contexts until very recently. Whilst acknowledging the enormous importance and impact of this approach to the study of student learning, it has been suggested that this focus has been developed at the expense of a range of other approaches to research which potentially have a great deal to contribute to the many research questions generated by contemporary higher education contexts.

As well as the academic literacy work discussed above, adult education research has a long history of debate around the “new” teaching technologies which are currently being adopted by higher education (e.g. self-directed learning, experiential learning, learning contracts and individual learner profiling). It also has a long history of engagement with workplace and work-based learning, and learning for work, which could provide a wealth of research and practice-based perspectives on the issues becoming of concern to higher education, in relation to the increasingly work-focused agenda which is being imposed on the sector. In relation to these wider contexts and purposes, the North American research potentially also has much to offer in terms of understanding the challenges created by more recent shifts in other areas of the world towards mass higher education systems.

In relation to research in other fields, currently “missing” perspectives from sociology and psychology have the potential to open up new ways of thinking about learning in higher education. Although some writers have begun to engage with sociological and critical theory (see Archer et al., 2003; McLean, 2006), higher education overall has barely begun to grapple with the implications of shifting from an individual to a social approach to learning. This means that it has not yet begun to engage with the problems and limitations of “social” perspectives such as those represented by theorists such as Habermas and Bourdieu. Socio-cultural learning theories such as situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991) and activity theory (Engeström, 1987) have had even less influence on theorising learning in higher education to date.

As higher education begins to engage with the “social” perspectives listed above, a considerable amount of theorising in sociology and psychology is already leaving such approaches far behind. Post-modern and post-structuralist perspectives point to issues of diversity, particularity and connectivity; but these issues are also emerging as important from a much wider range of areas. Fields as far apart as evolutionary biology, artificial intelligence, environmental planning and public health have long been engaging with a range of ecological and dynamic perspectives, which have profound implications for educational theory and research (see, for example, Bosma & Kunnan, 2001, and Fogel et al., 1997, in psychology, or Davis & Sumara, 2006, in education).

In relation to these perspectives, there are many aspects of learning that are still not well understood, and which the currently dominant ontologies and epistemologies struggle to investigate and represent (see Haggis, 2008). For example, research into learning is still not able to deal well with “the fleeting”, “the distributed”, “the multiple” and “the complex” (Law & Urry, 2003: 10):

Processess constitute the world of human experience—from nature to social reality to cognition itself. However, by and large, the centrality of processes does not appear to be reflected in theoretical descriptions of nature and the human domain (Seibt, 2003: vii).

As far as I am aware, there is as yet very little research that attempts to document different types of dynamic interaction and process through time in relation to “learning” situations in higher
education. For example, there are very few ethnographies (for an important exception, see Nespor, 1994), although academic literacies research has begun one strand of work from this perspective.

References


